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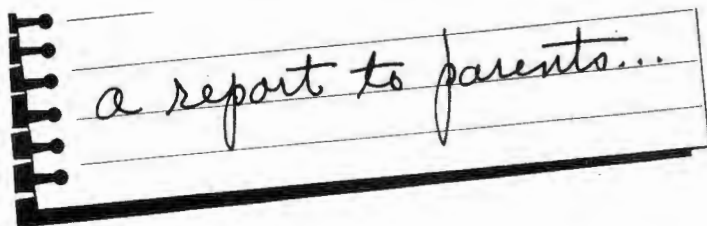
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# About Children's Social Behavior

A child's social behavior is an important part of his growth and development. As we gain insight into the cause of behavior, it's possible to provide guidance for the child in his social relationships with others.

by Damaris Pease

**S**Ocial BEHAVIOR is an important part of growth and development. At a recent meeting where parents were discussing their children, terms like the following were used—aggressive, shy, leader, selfish, conscientious, retiring and cooperative. These parents were describing their children's social behavior—how their children behave in relation to other people.

Often the term *personality* is used (or misused) to describe the impression an individual makes on others. Just as often, personality is thought of as a possession of an individual—to be brought out and used at will, or to be placed on a shelf until there's a particular need for it.

Actually, personality is the pattern of responses an individual makes to the environment of things and people in which he finds himself. Personality doesn't exist as something apart from the individual any more than the individual

can exist apart from others. Personality must always be the part of the person that is related to other people. It is the combination of the uniqueness of the person and his past experience.

To gain greater insight into the development of social behavior of children, we need to know how children establish a pattern of responses to their environment. When we gain insight into the cause of behavior, it's possible to provide guidance for the child so that his potential for a successful and happy social relationship with others can be more fully realized.

## Basic Needs . . .

One way in which a child develops reactions to others is through the fulfillment or lack of fulfillment of certain basic needs. How often have you heard: "What that child needs is to be disciplined," or "Susan needs a new coat," or "He needs to be more active."? These aren't basic needs in the strictest sense of the word. They are *ways* in which needs are fulfilled—not the needs themselves.



A basic need is universal in the sense that everyone in a particular culture has needs and, to a large extent, the same needs. Needs are continuous; that is, they're never completely fulfilled. They may be met at a particular time but, later in the child's development, must be met again. When they're fulfilled for the moment, however, the child feels satisfied and content. When a need is left unfulfilled, frustration and tension follow.

## Physical Needs . . .

Let's take a look at the activities of a typical 10-year-old boy. As Johnny comes bounding through the back door, he drops a mitten on the kitchen floor, drapes his coat haphazardly over the dining room chair and tosses his cap in the general direction of the coat closet. He

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paces back to the kitchen, straddles a chair and says, "Hi, Mom, when do we eat?" Before his mother can answer, he gets up and goes to the refrigerator, opens the door, looks inside, passes into the dining room, inspects the table, picks up a comic book from the living room and returns to the kitchen chair.



Johnny's mother tells him supper will be ready in 15 minutes. As he leafs through the comic book, he says, "Mom, I'm hungry. Can I have something to eat?" His mother reminds him that supper is almost ready and that he must wait until then to eat. A few minutes later, he goes into the living room—turns a couple of somersaults on the floor, runs halfway up the stairs, stops to inspect the bannister, crawls up the rest of the way on his hands and knees, goes into the bedroom and starts to count his baseball cards.



Suddenly he drops the cards on the bed and returns to the living room where he turns on the television but walks into the kitchen before the picture comes on and says, "Hey, Mom, when's our supper going to be ready?"

Obviously, Johnny is hungry. He has a need for energy which he has

learned can be fulfilled through eating. When he has to defer the fulfillment of this need, he becomes restless and increases his activity. Often his increased activity seems to be aimless and of little purpose. When the learned pattern of fulfilling a need isn't acceptable, the child attempts, often unconsciously, to satisfy the need in less acceptable ways.

Perhaps the part that basic needs play in the social behavior of a child can best be explained by thinking of the child's behavior as being in a state of unstable or disturbed equilibrium when a need must be met. His behavior will be characterized by increased or decreased activity or tension.

Let's think of behavior as typically stable—arising from a central axis or core. When a need must be met, pressure is brought to bear on this central axis, and the behavior loses some (but not all) of its stability. When the need is fulfilled, the axis regains its stability.

There is an area of acceptable or tolerant divergence within which the unstable behavior can still be handled by the child. Johnny was showing behavior caused by the failure to satisfy the need for energy. This behavior was within the area of acceptable divergence, and he was able to satisfy his need by eating before the pressure became so great that it forced his behavior beyond his control. Frequently children have to have help from adults to accept the pressure of an unfulfilled need until the need can be satisfied or until an acceptable substitute can be found.

### Psychological Needs . . .

There are two major types of needs: (1) physical or physiological and (2) acquired psychological needs. Johnny was demonstrating a physiological need for energy, usually fulfilled by food. The need to conserve energy is met through rest and sleep, the need to give off energy by activity, the need to let off body waste by elimination and the need for protection by shelter, clothes and body care.

The physical needs usually are well understood, for they're vital to the continuation of life. The psychological needs are more dif-

ficult to isolate and to interpret. The most important psychological needs include those for love, for belonging, for self-worthiness and for respect for authority.

The need for love can be satisfied in a variety of ways: through affection, reassurance and help. Mary, an active, independent 4-year-old, seems to know what she wants and is capable, in her 4-year-old way, of taking care of herself. She has been playing outdoors most of the morning when her mother calls her for lunch. Mary turns from her play and begins to run to the house. As she reaches the steps, she loses her footing, falls on the steps and bumps her lip.

Crying, she runs to her mother, who picks her up, hugs her, talks softly to her and washes away the tears. For a few minutes, Mary's mother holds her on her lap and rocks her until Mary stops sobbing and is ready to get down and eat her lunch. In this situation, Mary was unable to regain control of herself without help (love and assurance) from her mother.



### Finding a "Place" . . .

Most people, throughout life, have to establish a place for themselves as a part of a larger group. We join organizations, participate in community and neighborhood activities and affiliate with groups whose causes appeal to us (hospital drives, playground recreation, charities). In this way, adults acquire a sense of belonging, of contributing to something they feel is important and of which they want to be a part.

For children, this need to belong is satisfied by more immediate and personal situations. Nine-year-old Tommie usually plays with two other boys in the neighborhood. A new boy moves next door, and Tommie's friends spend a lot of time with him, tending to exclude Tommie from their play. The "group" to which Tommie thought he belonged no longer will satisfy this need. Tommie must now either find a new group or discover some way of re-entering the old group.

The social relations of most 9-year-olds are crude and halting. Tommie will make many attempts, some successful and some not, to get the other boys to accept him. Because the need to belong is so compelling, Tommie probably will find some means for becoming an acceptable group member; at least it's certain that he'll try. Friendship, companionship and likeness to others are ways in which we attempt to fulfill the need to belong.



## Status, Recognition . . .

Status and recognition are important to most people. They tend to satisfy the need for self-worthiness. As the need for self-worthiness is met and fulfilled, the child slowly gains an understanding of what kind of person he is. Other ways in which he fills this need are through experiences in which he is successful or not successful. He learns that there are some things he can do and some things he cannot do.

In the normal course of growing up, there are thousands of incidents in which he learns what he is capable of doing. There develops, in the child's experiences, a balance between success and failure. In this sense, failure is an important experience for growth. Most people experience success to a greater degree than failure. This results in a general over-all feeling of being

an adequate individual, capable of dealing with the freedoms and responsibilities of adulthood.

The 2-year-old who insists that he can button his own coat or put on his own boots is attempting to fulfill the need for self-worthiness. He must learn what he can do as a 2-year-old as well as what he must depend on others to do for him. Allowing him to try to put on his boots, although his parents know he can't perform the task, helps him to learn what he is capable of doing.



Once he has tried to get the boots on and realizes he can't do it, he's usually willing to accept help from others. In this situation, our 2-year-old is beginning to comprehend the relationship between being independent and dependent at a level he can understand.

## Respecting Authority . . .

Sooner or later, most people have to learn to live within certain limits. These limits are prescribed by the society in which they live, by physiological laws of nature and by individual family patterns and expectations. There is a basic need to respect the authority of these limits. As a child grows and increases his understanding of the world, he learns to adjust his wants and desires so that he may satisfy them within these limits—or he ignores the limits, refusing to face their reality.

After 2 days of rain, the sun began to shine, and 5-year-old Jimmie wanted to go outside to play. His mother agreed to let him if he would wear his boots. Jimmie refused to put on his boots but insisted on going out. His mother explained that it was too wet and that he might catch cold, but Jimmie

continued to insist on not wearing his boots.

In this example, Jimmie is failing to face the physiological law of nature; he lacks the understanding of the consequences of going outside without his boots. Besides understanding limits, Jimmie must learn to be in harmony with them; that is, he must either accept the limits or adjust his wishes in such a way as to derive satisfaction from his actions.

## Not All . . .

Basic needs aren't the only cause of social behavior. Some behavior comes about simply because the child is in a particular stage of development (see the April 1959 issue of *IOWA FARM SCIENCE* or Reprint FS-808).

Behavior frequently results from a combination of needs rather than from one specific need. When this occurs, one need usually is more predominant than another. When 4-year-old Mary slipped on the steps, it was more important to fulfill her need for love than her need to take on energy through eating.

Basic needs are developmental—not so much in the sense that the need changes or grows, but in the fact that the child is growing. With this growth comes a change in the ways the needs can be satisfied. As the child grows and develops, fulfillment of needs is accomplished in ever increasingly adult ways, provided the needs have been met at earlier stages or levels of development.



In general, when a need is fulfilled, the child is satisfied for the moment and has a feeling of well being. He is released from tension and is free to be creative, to use his imagination, to learn and to grow.